

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

» Getting to Know
COPA Pilots



LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now owns a Cirrus SR22. With John as the pilot-in-command and Laurie as the partner, they regularly travel to see family, visit friends and enjoy our beautiful country. You can read more of Laurie's work on her website: www.laurieeinsteinkoszuta.com.



The Student Beside Him

For CSIP Nick Stengl, his most memorable student turned out to be his wife, Kristy.

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

Teaching anyone to fly can test a flight instructor's patience. Teaching your spouse to fly may test everything else. Yet when Kristy Stengl learned to fly, it was her husband, Nick, a longtime flight instructor and air traffic controller, who eventually became her teacher. But that chapter came much later.



training in a single semester and then move into instrument and advanced ratings. At age 20 and a college sophomore, Nick embraced that pace of study and logged 180 hours, enabling him to step into the role of flight instructor.

“Right after I started instructing, September 11 happened,” said Nick. “That put a pause on airline hiring for a number of years.”

With the traditional airline path suddenly uncertain, Nick began looking beyond simply teaching primary and instrument students. That search eventually led him to the Cirrus factory in Duluth, Minnesota, where he worked through the UND Aerospace Foundation, providing transition training for Cirrus customers. At the time, owners came to Duluth to take delivery of their new aircraft and receive transition training. Today, owners take delivery in Knoxville, Tennessee.

“It was probably my favorite job to date,” he said. “I loved meeting new owners and hearing how they got into aviation and where they came from.”

While working at Cirrus, Nick heard about a pilot who worked full time as an air traffic controller while continuing to teach pilots on the side. The idea immediately resonated with him.

Intrigued by the idea of combining two parts of aviation, Nick decided to return to UND to pursue a degree in air traffic control while continuing to instruct on the side.

For Nick, aviation wasn’t something he thought much about since no one in his family had an aviation background. He was brought up on a farm in North Dakota and loved operating machinery, racing go-karts and driving anything with wheels attached.

“I really liked welding and construction,” he said. “I didn’t really plan on going to college because I thought I would do that kind of trade work. But my mom pestered me about making plans for after graduation.”

Yet living in Grand Forks near the University of North Dakota (UND) ultimately exposed him to one of the strongest aviation programs in the country. “I started thinking about it and thought flying an airplane might be a fun job,” said Nick, “so I decided to pursue a commercial aviation degree.”

What started as curiosity about flying soon developed into a fast-moving career path, with the possibility of becoming a pilot for the airlines. At UND, students can complete their private pilot



⏮ **Nick and Kristy** settle in up front, taking in the view from their favorite seat in the sky.

“When I graduated with my degree in air traffic management,” said Nick, “I was told it would take approximately 18 months to get a job with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as an air traffic controller.”

During that time, Nick learned about a Cirrus program that paired new aircraft owners with experienced pilots who would manage and fly their airplane for a year. During that time, the pilot would help train the owner and up to three other designated pilots in the aircraft.

“While waiting for the FAA,” said Nick, “the Cirrus program sounded like a good option for me. I ended up moving to Wausau, Wisconsin, to provide customer support on an owner’s SR22.”

When the FAA called with a job offer in 2008, Nick moved to Minneapolis to begin working at the Minneapolis Center and get facility-specific training and certification. Because of the intense training, flying took a back seat as Nick worked toward certification.

After becoming certified, Nick found himself back in the cockpit, teaching Cirrus pilots in the Minneapolis area as a side hustle while continuing his career as a controller.

“I was doing flight instruction for Cirrus pilots at airports around Minneapolis, such as Flying Cloud (KFCM), St. Paul Downtown (KSTP), Airlake (KLVN) and Anoka (KANE).”

For years, Nick balanced guiding airplanes from the control room while teaching from the cockpit whenever he could. In 2013, he moved to Colorado, where he began working at the Denver Center.

“I only flew sporadically over the next five to seven years,” Nick said. “Colorado has so many fun things to do, so I just concentrated on that and working as a controller.”

Eventually, the pull of the cockpit started to become more pronounced.

The Hangar Came First

Even though Nick and Kristy didn’t own an airplane at the time, an opportunity arose in 2020 to purchase a hangar at their local airport (KLMO) in Longmont, Colorado, so they decided to jump on it.

“Hangars are always hard to come by,” said Nick. “It made sense to get the hangar first and then find the plane later. Not



➤ **Nick and Kristy** wrap up a bike ride and prep for takeoff.

long after, we were asked to join a partnership on a Piper Saratoga. Unfortunately, after months of discussions and anticipation, the arrangement fell apart and the plane was ultimately sold.”

Although disappointed, Nick decided to take Kristy to a friend’s hangar and introduce her to a Cirrus SR22 G6.

“It was a beautiful plane and I fell in love with it,” Kristy said. “The parachute made me feel more comfortable and honestly, a plane like that would fit our adventurous lifestyle.”

The two began searching for their own Cirrus in 2024 and eventually found a one-owner 2007 SR22TN G3 in Colorado. “We really lucked out,” Kristy said. “It was at the Centennial Airport in Englewood, Colorado (KAPA), so we were able to take a test flight, get a pre-buy inspection nearby and everything came together pretty easily.”

At the time, Kristy was perfectly content as a passenger and becoming a pilot herself still wasn’t even a thought.

A Challenging Student

“Right as we were purchasing the plane,” said Kristy, “I went with Nick to a COPA Pilot Proficiency Program (CPPP) event and took the partner course. I had the chance to fly in the simulator, which I really liked. That is when I started thinking that I might want to become a pilot.”

Kristy knew that if she decided to take lessons, she wanted Nick to be her instructor.

“I give Nick a lot of credit for teaching me,” she said. “It takes a lot of tolerance to teach your spouse to fly an airplane. There were definitely a lot of tears.”

For Nick, the most challenging part wasn’t necessarily teaching the flight skills but resisting the urge to teach everything and overwhelm his student.

“I probably overexplained too much and too often,” Nick admitted. “I wanted to give her a deeper level of learning and understanding and give different ways to accomplish the same thing. I might say there is option A, option B or option C, but she just wanted one answer and to tell her what she needed to know.”

Under Nick’s instruction, Kristy earned her private pilot certificate in less than a year and completed her instrument rating in February 2026, flying exclusively in their Cirrus.

“I mean, I understand it was hard for him,” Kristy said. “He’s sending his wife up to fly solo for the first time and has to sign off on that. But we did it and now I am working on my commercial rating.”

Kristy noted that as she became more knowledgeable about flying, Nick admitted that he held her to a higher standard. “He definitely put me through the rigors of making sure that I was a good pilot.”



Family time at altitude.

That rigor included taking the Colorado Pilots Association mountain flying course. “It really is a great course for anyone,” said Nick, “because it teaches you about flying at high altitudes and what flights are like in the mountains.”

Who Flies the Plane

How are the duties divided when flying together?

“It’s nice because for every flight, I have an instructor,” said Kristy, “but we agreed that, when we go on trips, he flies one way and I fly the other.”

Nick notes that even with Kristy in the left seat, he can’t fully relax. “I can’t even fall asleep on an airliner,” said Nick. “I think it’s my personality and the fact that I am an air traffic controller and always want to be in control of the situation. It is the same thing with being a flight instructor.”

According to Nick, being a controller and a pilot is advantageous because he knows exactly what route they will get, what altitude, what frequency change and so many other aspects of flight.

Adventure Beyond the Runway

When the Stengls look at their Cirrus, it is easy for them to see the quality of the ride and the transportation it provides, but they can also see all the possibilities it creates.

“Any flight that takes us from point A to point B is my favorite flight,” said Nick, “I love that we can go somewhere and be there in no time. For example, last spring, Kristy wanted to hike in warm weather and within a couple of hours, we were in Amarillo exploring the Palo Duro Canyon. It was a spontaneous trip we might not have considered otherwise.”

Nick’s passion for aviation extends even into procedure design. Through his work in airspace and procedures, he helped create an instrument approach into Durango, Colorado, containing the names of family members woven throughout the fixes.

For years, Nick helped others discover the joys of aviation. He never expected the person sitting closest to him would perhaps become his most rewarding student. ☺

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